

## Press contact

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## Religious plurality in Azerbaijan: a national brand subject to state control

*Azerbaijan is one of the most secularized states in the Islamic world. A new ZOiS report examines how the state responds to growing religious plurality. While the image of religious diversity is marketed on an international stage, religious groups and communities associated with transnational or oppositional influence are subject to rigid control.*

Azerbaijan presents the case of a secular response to the post-Soviet revival of religion. The modern Azerbaijani state promotes the separation of religion from the state and a degree of ethnic and religious plurality, partly recognising a growing number of other Muslim groups, Christians and Jews. Yet, over the last decade, the Azerbaijani government has replaced moderate religious policies that welcomed Islam with a more restrictive approach.

“In the view of the Azerbaijani elites, Islam should be preserved as a cultural feature and part of the country's national heritage, rather than a social component and part of public life”, explains Dr Tsypylma Darieva, the author of the report.

### Strategies of control

Azerbaijani state elites employ three strategies for interacting with faith-based organisations. The first is a strategy of control of faith and its presence in public spaces, in particular when it comes to new ‘purist’ Muslim communities and oppositional Shia Islam.

The second strategy comprises selected restrictions on nontraditional faiths with transnational ties, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Churches, Krishnaism, and the Baha'i faith. The third strategy consists of strategic co-optation with those confessions that can be useful for elevating Azerbaijan's image on the international stage, in particular Judaism, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Lutheran Church, and Catholicism.

### Tolerance as a trademark

Tolerance and religious plurality is a top-down instrument of governance for promoting national unity on the basis of recognising ethnic and cultural diversity. The government exports an image of multiculturalism, turning it into an asset to improve the country's image. “It is likely that the elites want to position Azerbaijan on the global stage as a ‘good boy’ among the ‘bad boys’ of the Middle East, distancing Azerbaijani Islam from Middle Eastern and Arab Islam”, the author of the report concludes.

The full length report can be found online: [Tsypylma Darieva: “Faith and State: Governing Religious Plurality in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan”, ZOiS Report 3/ 2020](#)

**Tsypylma Darieva** is a social anthropologist and head of the research cluster *Migration and Diversity*.

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### Publication:

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